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PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH  
DE RUEHPF #0270/01 0811026  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 211026Z MAR 08  
FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 000270

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, P, D, DRL, IO

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [CB](#)  
SUBJECT: PRIME TIME FOR TELEVISED CANDIDATE DEBATES IN  
CAMBODIAN NATIONAL ELECTION

REF: PHNOM PENH 73

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: To support prime time TV access for some of NDI's planned candidate debates during the June-July campaign season, the Ambassador March 21 called on Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith. The Ambassador emphasized the importance of media access for all parties in advance of the July 27 national election. Earlier, the Ambassador had appealed to National Election Committee (NEC) Chairman Im Suosdey to urge that the RGC televise some of the one-hour debates in full and had also raised the issue with DPM and Minister of Interior Sar Kheng (who oversees the NEC). Khieu Kanharith said he fully supported the idea of televising party debates run by civil society and urged the USAID Mission to support NDI as it applied for official approval of the debates with NEC. Kanharith also agreed to the Ambassador's proposal that national television TVK take the lead and attempt to air at least 10 debates from each of the targeted provinces on prime time. This will be the first-ever, widely televised debates, giving opposition parties a more equal footing in media access. Khieu Kanharith parried the Ambassador's remark that the MFA had gone too far in a press release implying the USG had released our human rights report to affect the elections by noting he personally had not said anything like that. END SUMMARY.

Minister of Information: TV Debates a "Great Idea"

¶2. (SBU) Khieu Khanarith warmly received the Ambassador,s suggestion for televising debates, saying it would be good for Cambodia, and calling it a "great idea." He cautioned however that the debates would have to follow the legal framework established in the NEC,s rules and could occur only during the election campaign period (June 25 - July 25).

In particular, the regulations stated that all parties - no matter the size - had to be included in some fashion, he noted. When informed that a minimal level of participation was planned (at least one debate for each of the minor parties), he opined there would be "no problem at all" in televising the debates. He recalled other debates organized by civil society that included only the major parties, but these were not aired on national TV or national radio, he said. NDI expects widespread radio coverage of the 30 planned National Assembly Candidate Debates, some being live.

The one-hour TV debates will be limited to five parties and all contesting parties will be invited at different times. In 2003, only a limited number of debates were run on TV.

¶3. (SBU) Suggesting that the NEC and UNDP election assistance program could sponsor a separate televised issues round-table to include the smaller parties, Kanharith noted that it might even be possible to then restrict televised debates to the major parties only (CPP, FUNCINPEC, SRP and NRP were major participants in the commune council

elections). "NDI could supervise the real debates and the NEC and UNDP can take care of the others," he noted. (NOTE: Cambodia has a long tradition of multi-party participation in national elections and most observers expect at least 25 of the 45 currently registered parties to stand in the elections. END NOTE.)

#### Prime Time Slots Considered

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14. (SBU) Khieu Kanharith readily agreed that National Television station TVK and the national AM and FM radio stations should air the taped, one-hour debates. (Each debate would have five candidates in a format that allows for presentations as well as directed exchanges and would be moderated by experienced emcees, many of whom participated as moderators in the commune council election debates.) In answer to the Ambassador's question about which time slots might be made available for the debates, Khieu Kanharith said that the best times were in the afternoon (12:30 to 2:00 p.m.) or directly after the evening news (after 8:00 p.m.). He noted that he personally would take leave to be able to participate in the public campaigning between June 25 and July 25, but that NEC would have control over the time slots during the campaign period. Kanharith pointed out that ruling party CPP is learning how to participate in democratic elections. Some observers predict that, based on commune council debate experience last year, the CPP likely will make a good showing in the debates.

#### NEC Gave Earlier, Informal Nod

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15. (SBU) In a February 28 meeting, NEC Chairman Im Suosdey

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told the Ambassador he was fully supportive of the debate idea in principle. He mentioned prior television coverage of debates in 2003 - a limited number were run on the less popular military station, TV5. The NDI plan on media access for debates in 2008 is much more ambitious. NDI expects widespread radio coverage of the National Assembly Candidate Debates, some being live. The one-hour debates will be limited to five parties, but all contesting parties will be invited at different times. In 2003, only a limited number of debates were run on TV. The NEC reaction to the final formal submission of a plan will be decisive. However, Im Suosdey made it clear that the government at the cabinet level and the Ministry of Information in particular would have to be involved in a final decision on televising debates. (NOTE: In early March, Human Rights Party leader Khem Sokha floated a trial balloon about having debates among the parties' prime-minister designates. This predictably resulted in a series of salvos back and forth in the print press with Hun Sen who finally stated in highly publicized speeches that he didn't need to debate because not only did everyone know him, but he was known to deliver to the people.

When Hun Sen talked about education, he built new schools; when Hun Sen spoke about transportation, he gave the people new roads, he said. When Khem Sokha persisted, Hun Sen said he didn't need to debate with someone who had been corrupt in running a human rights organization, or with someone else who could never manage his party nor even his family - thinly veiled references to Khem Sokha and Prince Ranariddh. It was no surprise that NEC's Im Suosdey later confirmed to Pol/Ec Chief that PM-designate debates were not on. END NOTE.)

#### Sar Kheng Very Upbeat; USAID Taking Next Steps

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16. (SBU) In a March 3 meeting, DPM and Minister of Interior Sar Kheng told the Ambassador that he did not think the government would object to such debates being televised. This has been done before during past elections and NDI and IRI had even prepared public forums (issue debates) before the official election campaign season, he noted. As for the

media and the time of broadcasts, the NEC will need to raise those issues with the government through official channels, he said.

17. (SBU) USAID's Democracy and Governance Office has already relayed the news about RGC support to date and NDI is reportedly working on the formal submission of a plan to NEC for the 10 televised debates.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Although Sar Kheng was as positive and supportive as he could be, he seemed cautious in the early March meeting. We now have a better indication this proposed prime-time debate series will fly. We assume that, as we had planned, Sar Kheng broached the idea of televised debates at the highest levels. If all goes according to plan, this will be the first time that the Cambodian electorate will witness National Assembly candidates debating their parties' platforms in the most widely accessible and influential media. All of the polling indicates that the vast majority of Cambodians now get their news from television. These debates will be a small step toward more access to the electorate through major media often controlled by the CPP or run by private CPP supporters.  
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